

STATEMENT
HONORABLE CHRIS SMITH
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION

MARCH 7, 2001

THANK YOU MR. CHAIRMAN FOR THIS OPPORTUNITY TO APPEAR BEFORE YOUR COMMITTEE TO PRESENT OUR BUDGET SUBMISSION FOR THE 107TH CONGRESS. RANKING MEMBER LANE EVANS JOINS ME HERE TODAY IN SUPPORT OF THE VA COMMITTEE'S REQUEST. I COME BEFORE YOU TODAY AS A NEW CHAIRMAN FOLLOWING CHAIRMAN BOB STUMP, INSPIRED HARD WORK FROM MEMBERS AND STAFF ALIKE ON BEHALF OF AMERICA'S VETERANS.

AS YOU KNOW, WE HAVE OVERSIGHT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS. VA IS THE SECOND LARGEST FEDERAL AGENCY, EMPLOYING OVER 200,000 WITH BUDGET AUTHORITY OF \$47.6 BILLION FOR THE CURRENT YEAR.

THE VA COMMITTEE BUDGET REQUEST FOR THE 107TH CONGRESS OF \$5,273,013 WILL PROVIDE US WITH THE FUNDS TO STAFF AND RUN THE COMMITTEE, TRAVEL TO PERFORM OVERSIGHT OF VA FACILITIES, AND HOLD DETAILED FIELD HEARINGS, WHERE WE

**ARE ABLE TO LEARN SO MUCH ABOUT THE NEEDS OF VETERANS
IN YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES.**

**MR. CHAIRMAN, DURING THE 104TH, 105TH, AND 106TH,
CONGRESSES, THE VA COMMITTEE HELD TO A SELF IMPOSED STAFF
LIMIT OF 30, ALTHOUGH THE SPEAKER'S CEILING ALLOWED FOR 34.**

**THESE POSITIONS WERE SPLIT ON A 2/3-1/3 BASIS WITH THE
MINORITY CONTROLLING THEIR OWN SALARY BUDGET.**

**IT HAS BECOME EVIDENT TO ME, IN MY SHORT TIME AS
CHAIRMAN, THAT THE COMMITTEE NEEDS TO STAFF TO THE
ALLOWED CEILING. FUNDING AT THE REQUESTED LEVELS WILL
ALLOW FOR 34 TOTAL STAFF – 23 MAJORITY AND 11 MINORITY.**

**ALTHOUGH FUNDS IN THE EQUIPMENT, TRAVEL AND
ADMINISTRATIVE CATEGORIES ARE NOT OFFICIALLY DIVIDED UNDER
A 2/3-1/3 SPLIT, I AM SURE THAT MR. EVANS WOULD CONFIRM THAT
SUCH RESOURCES ARE MADE AVAILABLE TO THE MINORITY ON AN
AS-NEEDED BASIS. MOREOVER, ADMINISTRATIVE FUNCTIONS ARE
PROVIDED BY STAFF IN MAJORITY SLOTS - WE DON'T CHARGE THE
MINORITY FOR A PORTION OF THE SLOTS OR THE SALARIES.**

MR. CHAIRMAN, WE DO NOT PLAN EXTENSIVE RENOVATION OF THE AUDIO/VISUAL SYSTEMS IN THE COMMITTEE HEARING ROOMS. THEY ARE DEEMED HISTORIC BY THE ARCHITECT'S OFFICE AND WE PLAN TO AVOID ANY CHANGES THAT WOULD DETRACT FROM THE ARCHITECTURAL INTEGRITY OF THESE ROOMS.

HOWEVER, AFTER WAITING FOR TWO YEARS FOR THE ARCHITECT TO REPLACE THE SOUND SYSTEMS IN THE TWO ROOMS, WE ARE NOW INFORMED BY YOUR COMMITTEE THAT THOSE FUNDS ARE NOT GOING TO BE AVAILABLE. THEREFORE, OUR PROPOSAL INCLUDES FUNDS TO REPLACE THE SYSTEMS DURING THIS CONGRESS.

MR. CHAIRMAN, WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A SMALL COMMITTEE WITH BIG RESPONSIBILITY.

THERE ARE ALMOST 25 MILLION VETERANS IN THIS COUNTRY WHO MAY BE DIRECTLY AFFECTED EVERY DAY BY THE WORK THAT WE DO HERE. 70 MILLION AMERICANS, NEARLY 1/4 OF OUR POPULATION, ARE POTENTIAL VA BENEFICIARIES.

**THE VA COMMITTEE HAS ENDEAVORED TO BE A STONG
ADVOCATE OF THESE VETERANS AND THEIR INTERESTS BY KEEPING
THEM INFORMED OF CURRENT LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES. OUR WEB-
SITE, PRODUCED AND MAINTAINED IN-HOUSE, HAS AN AVERAGE OF
157,000 HITS PER MONTH.**

**OUR "VETERANS LEGISLATIVE UPDATE" IS AVAILABLE TO ALL
OF YOUR OFFICES TO KEEP YOUR VETERANS INFORMED. VETERANS
RESIDE IN EACH OF YOUR DISTRICTS. AS VA COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN
BEFORE ME HAVE ALWAYS EMPHASIZED DURING THIS FUNDING
RESOLUTION PROCESS, WE ARE TALKING ABOUT AN OBLIGATION BY
THIS COUNTRY TO REAL PEOPLE HERE - NOT JUST OFFICE AND
MEDICAL BUILDINGS WITH THE VA LOGO.**

**MR. CHAIRMAN, THE VA COMMITTEE HAS NEVER TRULY
PERFORMED ADEQUATE, INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT OF VA
FACILITIES.**

**THE 173 HOSPITALS, 551 OUTPATIENT CLINICS, 131 NURSING
HOMES, 40 DOMICILIARIES, 115 NATIONAL CEMETERIES AND 58
REGIONAL BENEFITS PROCESSING OFFICES WITHIN THE VA SYSTEM**

SHOULD BE SUBJECT TO MUCH MORE VIGOROUS OVERSIGHT THAN IN THE PAST.

OUR BUDGET REPRESENTS A NEED TO EXPAND OUR RESEARCH AND INVESTIGATIVE CAPABILITY AND TO EXTEND AN ADDITIONAL STAFF POSITION TO THE MINORITY.

WE NEED TO SEND STAFF INTO THE FIELD TO SEE FIRST HAND WHAT'S GOING ON IN THE HOSPITALS AND BENEFITS PROCESSING OFFICES.

YOUR OWN CASEWORKERS CAN VERIFY THE VA WORKLOAD THEY HANDLE, THE INCREDIBLE WAITING TIMES FOR MEDICAL APPOINTMENTS AND ADJUDICATION OF CLAIMS AND OTHER PROBLEMS THAT VETERANS FACE EVERY DAY WITH THE VA.

MR. CHAIRMAN, YOU SERVED ON THE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE DURING THE 104TH CONGRESS, ON BOTH THE HEALTH AND COMPENSATION, PENSION, INSURANCE & MEMORIAL AFFAIRS SUBCOMMITTEES. IN ADDITION, MR. LINDER, MR. MICA AND HIS BROTHER BEFORE HIM ALSO SERVED WITH US. I'M SURE YOU'LL ALL REMEMBER FIRST HAND THE COMPLEX CHALLENGES THAT WE FACE ON THE VA COMMITTEE. YOU UNDERSTAND THAT AS A

**SMALL COMMITTEE WE WORK SMARTLY TO OFFER THE FINEST
LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES TO MAINTAIN AND IMPROVE THE LIVES OF
VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.**

**MR. CHAIRMAN, IN KEEPING A TRADITION IN THE VA
COMMITTEE'S TESTIMONY BEFORE THIS PANEL, LET ME REPORT TO
YOU THAT OUR COMBINED STAFF OF 30 HAS 516 YEARS OF FEDERAL
SERVICE, RANGING FROM LESS THAN A YEAR TO SEVERAL MAJORITY
AND MINORITY STAFF MEMBERS WITH OVER 20 YEARS, ONE WITH 37
- - THIS EXPERIENCE IS VITAL TO OUR EXISTENCE AS SUCH A SMALL
COMMITTEE.**

**MR. CHAIRMAN, LET ME ASSURE YOU THAT THE COMMITTEE
ON VETERANS AFFAIRS GIVES THE CONGRESS AND THE VETERANS OF
THIS COUNTRY THEIR MONEY'S WORTH EVERYDAY.**

**I AM HAPPY TO ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT HAVE
TODAY.**